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ABSTRACT

Not all fighting or aggression in young children is bad, and some kinds of teacher intervention may be beneficial. Play-fighting refers primarily to rough and tumble play and chasing, and several studies have shown that play and serious fighting can be clearly distinguished in young children. Numerous authors have pointed out the value and positive aspects of aggression. Aggressive behavior is often the most immediate way for a child to communicate his or her desires and needs, and teachers need to try to understand what children are communicating rather than judge their behavior. Play-fighting is a very common occurrence among boys, and seems to occur less with girls. Girls who display aggressive behavior have generally been socialized like boys. Boys often use aggressive behavior and play-fighting to make friends, exhibit frustration due to failure at making friends, and to become more assertive and overcome their fear of aggressive boys. It is crucial for adults and teachers to encourage children to respond to aggression by asserting their feelings with statements such as "Stop it" or "I don't like that," rather than by simply hitting back or running to the teacher. A child's self-esteem can build when encouraged to take responsibility for his or her own feelings. Teachers can play a positive role in assisting children to express and channel their aggressive behavior. (AS)

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The Positive Aspects of Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

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Is all fighting/aggression in young children bad? In conflict situations, what kinds of intervention by a teacher can be beneficial to children? In considering these questions, I will be referring to the literature on play-fighting, (rough and tumble play and aggression). I will support my ideas by citing observations of children from my classroom over the last four years. I will also look at the role of the teacher in conflict situations. All the children's names have been changed.

Seventeen years ago, I was an assistant teacher in a preschool. Leonard had a long history of aggressive behavior. One day on the playground, I saw Leonard grab and pull Mike off the bike to the ground. Mike was screaming. (I saw nothing that preceded it.) My reaction was immediate -- I ran over to Leonard, I was screaming, I grabbed him by the arm and practically dragged him down a flight of stairs to the classroom. I can't remember a thing I said, but I lectured a lot and I don't think I even asked him what happened. When we returned to the roof, Mike ran up to Leonard laughing and they both ran off to play. I've always remembered this incident. I was left with two impressions: one about the children - they knew/understood something I didn't; the other was about myself and my reaction to the situation. I had much to learn.

Play fighting refers primarily to rough and tumble play and chasing. Such play behaviors "mimic more intentionally aggressive actions" (DiPietro, 1981), but are accompanied by laughter and by a tendency for the participants to stay together rather than separate (Aldis, 1975).

Several studies have found that play and serious fighting can be clearly distinguished in young children. In his study of young children, Blurton Jones (1967, 1972) found that play-fighting and aggression emerged as separate classes of behavior. "Aggression" tended to be concentrated into disputes over possession of objects and consequently included object-specific behaviors such as "grab" and "take", while "rough and tumble" did not occur in this context. Although some of these behaviors were similar, the differences showed by in facial expression. The playful rough-and-tumble factor was loaded high for the categories "laugh" and "playface"; whereas the expressions associated with aggression were "frown" and "fixate".

Aldis (1975) distinguished play-fighting and aggression by considering the outcome of the encounters. He defined the encounter as playful if the participants remained together in friendly social interaction after its cessation. Aggression, on the other hand, was seen as leading to separation of the participants. By this criterion, Aldis found that the vast majority of fighting behavior which he saw in school playgrounds and elsewhere was clearly playful, and

constituted a part of the children s friendly social interaction. Facial expression and outcome have thus both been seen as features distinguishing play-fighting and aggression.

An overview of the place that play-fighting/rough and tumble play holds in the literature in this century is as follows:

Play-fighting was given due consideration by the early play theorists, particularly Groos, who devoted a large section of The Play in Man (1901) to "Fighting Play". Then rough and tumble play received little attention from researchers for several decades. Piaget s (1951) categories of functional and dramatic play and constructive activity scarcely allow a place for rough and tumble. The primary interest of psychologists and educators has been in constructive play activities and the choice of appropriate play materials; in pretend play, the development of imagination and the processes of identification and projection; and in the development of social participation in play (e.g., Buhler, 1935; Valentine, 1956; Mussen, Conger and Kagan, 1963). "Play-fighting seems to have been often ignored or else briefly noted in passing as an aimless, unorganized or somewhat undesirable activity." (Humphreys, p. 242).

It was an ethologist, Blurton Jones (1972), who first explicitly described and discussed "rough and tumble" play in human children while watching behavior in a nursery school. He took the term from the Harlow's description of play in Rheus monkeys. A major contribution was also made by Aldis in his book, Play Fighting (1975).

An ERIC search for the thirteen year period 1966-79 shows thirty-two studies regarding aggression, play and preschoolers. The seven year period 1980-87 shows thirty-four studies reflecting the growing interest in this field.

A brief look at more recent literature on the positive aspects of aggression follows:

Carroll Felleman and Abraham Shumsky (1960) in "The Aggressive Child" state "It is an ingredient of ambition; it is necessary for the development of all skills; it is required if various energy potentials are to be utilized." For the child, aggression is necessary for him to draw upon this energy in order that he may learn to read, to figure, to write, to play, to ride. Too often it is not realized that aggression in fundamental to virtually all activities. Too often there is only the awareness of the disruptive qualities of this drive. Consequently, the approach to eradicate or suppress rather than to understand and redirect this force from its asocial and destructive goals. Only when there has been an excessive inhibition of aggression is it evident how vital is this impulse for the performance of so many human

actions.

Cohen and Stern (1983, p. 59) state that "in the process of relating to each other, children so often strike first and ask later...bodily contacts (tough, shove, push, pat, buck) are all means of communicating." (Underlining mine.)

In The Learning Child, Cohen (1972) is very direct in making clear that children's fighting is not only not necessarily harmful, but can be of great value, since it is the only problem-solving technique children know.

Both Kagan (1978) and Fraiberg (1959) refer to age six when a child has developed the capacity to empathize with others' feelings and thus form a foundation for regarding restraint on aggression as good. Cohen and Stern (1983) describe a two year old as looking at another child as they do objects: as something to tough, to smell and "maybe to taste!" -- so much so that a two year old pours sand on another child's head and then stares in amazement at his distress. So between two years and six, a child has much to accomplish socially and I think for a child being a active maker of meaning of his world, aggression - in its many aspects - plays an important role in the development of his self and his relationships with others. If his aggressive or play-fighting behaviors are simply regarded as bad, how will this effect his self-esteem and his future development of empathy?

When my friend Susan's baby was born, it seemed that every week she was able to discern a new meaning in her child's cry: from the more obvious "I'm hungry or wet" to the more "I'm uncomfortable, I want to lie on my back." And so it seems also with aggressive behavior. A child hits someone. Is he saying to the child, "I don't like it when you do that?"; "I want that/"; "Stop it."' "I feel left out.". Or for some children: "I want to be your friend."; "Let's play." or "I like you.".

The list seems endless, but if we communicate to a child that we are trying to understand what they are communicating rather than judging the behavior, the child-teacher relationship also opens for growth! As Cohen (1972) pointed out, so often, aggressive behavior is the most immediate way for a child to communicate his needs and desires. Although no one would want a child to continue in this mode of communication (as with crying!), how we view it and, therefore, how we react to it is crucial to a child's well-being. More on this later.

Although I had not originally thought of play-fighting in terms of gender, my observations repeatedly showed the occurrence among boys. Research shows that although males as a group always display more aggression and get higher scores than females, there are, nonetheless, some females who are just as aggressive as males. These are usually girls who have been socialized like boys. "Such findings can be taken

as evidence that over and above any innate, biological or hormonal factors which may account for the differential rate and magnitude of aggressive behavior between males and females, there are learning and experiential factors that also contribute to the difference." (Eron, 1984, p. 155). "Among nursery school children, when girls are aggressive, they are usually softly reprimanded while boys are often scolded loudly, restrained physically and given specific directions about what to do." (Serbin, et.al., 1973).

I have observed that girls resort to physical aggressive behavior most often if one of their parents is travelling (separation) and during the time around the birth of a sibling.

During a music class, the music teacher had to stop several times and comment on Talia's disruptive behavior (which was unusual). I finally remembered that her father had left that morning. When I called her back to where I was sitting, Talia crawled with her head down, her eyebrows slightly knit together, but when I whispered in her ear "Are you missing your Abba?" her face relaxed, she put her thumb in her mouth (very unusual) and leaned all her weight against me; I put my arm around her and she lay there for almost the whole music class, when she resumed her position next to her friends.

Lucy's brother was a week old. She was playing in the housekeeping area with her friends. She picked up a tray and hit her "best friend" squarely over the head. Lucy's face showed little expression, but Janey's eyes opened wide and her mouth dropped open. (I think she was in mild shock.) Janey said nothing and their play continued. (I think Lucy had never hit in class and the five months previous to this, and after a few more minor hitting incidents that month, was not to hit again that year. I think that Janey didn't

complain about being hit because on some level she understood.)

Girls, even if they are the ones who hit firsts, often want to see the other punished and are often surprised when they are "found out."

Dia: "Janet, Lesa hit me." (in a voice seeking sympathy)
Janet: "Let's go talk with her."
As we approach Lesa, she says loudly in her own defense: "She hit me first!"
Dia (looking somewhat surprised) responds without missing a beat, with a plea of innocence in her voice: "She hit me harder!"

Girls seem to be more verbally than physically aggressive. The reading I did for this paper affected the way I handled the following incident:

Two girls, Sonia (3 1/2) and Katia (4 1/2) had, for five weeks, numerous verbal outbreaks usually involving sharing. I had tried to intervene as little as possible because both girls were used to having their own way and I feel that it was good for them to work it out. One morning Katia's mother said that Katia was complaining at home about Sonia. I said that I thought they were trying to become friends, but that I would observe them. After nap, the girls were sitting opposite each other at the table drawing with craypas. There was a constant verbal interchange and then Sonia grabbed Katia's craypa. Katia started to yell (excessively) and Sonia started to defend herself, yelling also. Then there was quiet. Sonia said, but not looking at Katia, "I hate you!" She looked at me, our eyes met, but I showed little or no reaction. I lowered my eyes, said in a low voice, almost as an aside, "You know, you girls are really friends, you both just like to yell."

I looked up at Talia, she was looking at me. A grin began to spread across her lips, a quiet laugh, then louder. She laughed as she said, "We're really friends, we just like to yell."

Katia began to laugh (at first hesitantly, then louder) and she said, We're really friends, we just like to yell." Over the next three days they repeated this often (with the yelling, then laughing), then it ceased and they seemed to

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need to yell no more, and they began to share more easily.

The observations of the aggressive behavior and play-fighting in boys seems more complex. The following observations show various forms of aggressive behavior used by boys to (1) make friends; (2) exhibit frustration due to repeated failure at making friends; (3) become more assertive and overcome their fear of aggressive boys. It is difficult for many teachers and parents to view play-fighting in a positive light - even when both children are laughing and obviously enjoying themselves. So it is even more difficult when some children may respond to playful approaches in a non-playful way (Blurton Jones, 1967; Sluckin, 1981). It is however, in these situations that an adult's understanding be crucial.

Dan had just turned four. He was very large for his age. David was 3 1/2 and seemed afraid of Dan. David came to me the third week of school (they had known each other in the previous class) and said that Dan had hit him (I hadn't seen the incident). After we talked, I said, "Don't you two want to be friends?" They both yelled in unison, "No!" So I quickly dropped it! But the next day, they came up to me hand in hand and said, "Look, Janet, we're friends!"

Later in the year, Willis moved into the morning class with Dan. Dan seemed to like Willis, but Willis seemed afraid of Dan. There were several small incidents of Dan hitting Willis and Willis' parents wanted the boys separated (Willis complained at home). One day the class was preparing for a play and Willis yelled, "I don't want to be in this play" and stamped out of the room. When I related the incident to his parents, they felt he was upset by Dan's hitting. I talked with Dan's mother, who told Dan a story that night about two little boys who wanted to be friends, but one boy hit the

other. The mother related that Dan woke up the next day and said, "I want to be Willis' friend." Willis "Wrote" Dan a letter. They had several play-dates. Their communication can be so complicated and yet so simple! How great that Dan's mother didn't lecture to him! But was able to communicate in a way her son could understand!

A year later, David (4 1/2) (who has also been afraid of Dan) had to contend with Micki, a year younger, but large for his age. All Micki had to do was to stick his hand out (even ten feet from David) and say anything like "Yeek" and David would start crying. (I tried role playing with David, so he could practice ignoring me when I said "Yeek" and sticking out my hand, pretending I was Micki, of course. I'm not sure if this had any real consequence!) After about two months, one day they were rolling on the carpet (bodies clenched together). Micki seemed delighted, eyes wide and laughing loudly. David looked at me with wide staring eyes, his jaw set (seemed panicked), but I smiled at David and said, "Are you two playing again?" (It was the first time they had made physical contact.) David's eyes relaxed and he smiled from the huddle and said, "Yes, we're playing." That night, I called his mother. She related that David said, "Micki's my fighting friend." (The rolling on the ground was the closest to fighting that David had ever come - he was so proud, and I think a little of his fear dissolved.)

The following observations show children who exhibit frustration due to repeated failure at making friends:

Dimi and Ian were similar in that they both lacked friends. They were also similar in that they both expressed their frustration through aggression (kicking over blocks seemed a favorite). "A considerable proportion of aggressive behavior represents a reaction to frustration." (Montagu, p. 14). Luckily, they had a third thing in common, after receiving an enormous amount of positive input from their teachers, setting limits, and assistance in verbalizing their feelings, Dimi and Ian made friends and their aggressive behavior ceased.

Although their "stories" are too complex to elaborate on here, it is noteworthy that the entire class went through a process as they two boys grew in their ability to communicate. I cite as an example the first time that the groups of boys, who had unanimously ostracized Dimi from

their group for seven months, finally "allowed" him in the block area. I watched in amazement. Dimi's face was glowing. Then quite by accident (but what an opportunity for a group of almost five year olds to pounce on), Dimi knocked over some of the blocks. Everyone knew it was an accident. I held my breath (I think Dimi did, too). Then one of the boys said, "Oh well, we can build it again." Dimi was accepted.

The following examples illustrate aggressive behavior used by boys to overcome their fear of aggressive boys:

Abe, Sed, Willis, Matthew, Nir and Jedd (students I had over a four year period) have all been described by various adults as "sweet, quiet, doesn't fight and bright." Two of these boys were the "teacher's pet" when I first came to the class. They never caused trouble. Unfortunately, they also had trouble expressing their anger in any way (one boy smiled), where very afraid of boys who were even playfully aggressive, and consistently ran to adults when they were hit. They were "victims." But because they don't cause problems, their need for intervention is often ignored.

These children (and many girls) can be helped most by encouraging the child to respond to aggression (whether from being pushed or yelled at) not be hitting back or running to the teacher, but by saying "Stop it" or "I don't like that." A child's self-esteem can build when encouraged to take responsibility for his own feelings. Often when an adult sees a child hit, he/she runs to the aid of the child hit and reprimands the child who did the hitting. I think this reinforces to both children that (1) the child who hit is bad and, therefore, to be avoided; and (2) the child hit can't take care of himself. So instead, aggressive encounters can become fertile ground for children not only on

which to express their feelings, but often become the foundation on which friendships are laid. These children do often need intervention.

On the playground, Mark was riding his bike fast, often changing direction -- smiling and laughing in delight. Then he turned his bike and ran into Matthew's bike (which was stationary) and shouts of glee by Mark. Matthew looked up and smiled at Mark, but after Mark left, Matthew looked down at the ground and starting kicking some stones. I approached Matthew and asked him if he like it when Mark ran his bike into his bike. He looked up hesitantly and said in a soft voice, "No." (Even though his response had been to smile.)

Every teacher can think or children (boys and girls) who seem to be wearing signs that say "Hit me." Often the parents unknowingly have made such a point of "no hitting" to their children that the child is frozen in non-response. There are also the parents who view the child who is more aggressive as "bad." But I have also found many of these parents very responsive when I suggest (sometimes on several occasions!) that rather than intervening when their child is hit, that they encourage their child to yell "Stop it!". I have even gone as far as suggesting play-dates between children who tend to fight.

Sed and Abe were quite a match. Sed was five going on six. He was "held back" a year because he was "emotionally immature." I don't think he'd been in a fight in his life. Abe was five but in size and stature looked like he was three. He had an older brother who was literally three times his size and who terrorized Abe. Abe never responded. Abe's only response to any even vague form of aggression was to cry. From the beginning, Sed began to tease Abe. Sed: "Abe, there's snakes in your yogurt." Abe would cry (he didn't eat his yogurt for a month). At these instances, and

numerous other instances when Abe would cry (feeling the victim), the teachers would encourage Abe to say "Stop it" or "I don't like that!". After several months, at the end o "roof time", the children were sitting and waiting for the elevator. Abe and Sed were sitting cross-legged facing each other. They began to shadow box, but they were actually hitting each other and laughing! They hit arm to arm in rhythmic way, first gently, then harder. Abe got in a few light punches to the chest!

Before we can look at the positive role that teachers can play in understanding and assisting children to express and channel their aggressive behavior, I will first show some of the problems that aggressive behavior in children has posed to teachers by reviewing some of the more recent studies.

As was mentioned, earlier, rough and tumble play was not viewed favorably at all between 1910 and 1960 and only moderately so since then. Recent studies show (Felleman, 1960) that teachers find it most difficult to accept the aggressive child. Discussions with teachers show that the behavior of the aggressive child is perceived as a threat to the teacher's position in the class. "It threatens some of the most sensitive and vulnerable areas of functioning - their perception of their major need of maintenance of control; and their struggle around the setting of constructive limits." (Felleman, p. 141). Felleman and Shumsky (1960) also cite another factor underlying the relative difficulty in relating to the aggressive child which is the fact that the majority of teachers are women. The

behavior they idealize is feminine-oriented toward compliance, neatness and a general passivity. In a study by Serbin and O'Leary (1973), the teachers were more likely to respond when boys were aggressive than when girls were. They also used more loud reprimands when scolding boys. The study also showed that the teacher's attention to disruption can reinforce and maintain the behavior it is intended to discourage.

In other studies, rates of aggressive behavior in preschool children were shown experimentally to decrease when the behavior was ignored by the teacher (Brown and Elliot, 1965).

I found Adam Fraczek's work with aggressive behavior and his findings to be applicable and helpful to teachers:

> "In regulating aggression, I hold that the individual's internal control is more essential than external control, where development is directed toward strengthening internal control of impulses, not toward the inhibition of impulses." (p. 259)

Fraczek indicated that the aim of the treatment was not to force a person to behave in a certain way but to increase awareness of the alternatives of behavior from which to choose. I think that this way of dealing with aggressive behavior in children could be very liberating for a child. A teacher may try to intercede by helping the child communicate his feelings -- "What were you trying to say?" (when you hit so and so). In this way, the child's way of making meaning in the world is not violated, only alternatives to that are being offered. Felleman (1960) emphasizes that a teacher can greatly help an aggressive child by communicating to the child the feeling that he is wanted and that he is accepted as a member of the group. And also recognizing that the aggressive child is a slow learner in the area of social relations.

In reading about the various studies regarding

aggressive behavior and ways in dealing with it, I was most impressed with the studies done on the child rearing practices in non-violent cultures and how they dealt with aggression. Simply put - they ignored it! The Samai culture is one example. Adults and older children rarely interfere actively with the quarrels of younger children who they describe as "having hearts like dogs" and are expected to squabble until a child seems "to have lost its temper completely." (Denton, p. 131). Denton describes the children as becoming boisterous many times a day and the adults crying out "Trlaid! Trlaid!" and the adults are <u>usually laughing</u> and the children rarely stop what they are doing. It seems to be mostly a "pro forma" reminder that cautious reserve is proper behavior. But probably one of the most influential inhibitors of childhood aggression is the fact that children see so few examples of it (neither from adults or T.V.!) and parents of children from non-violent cultures do <u>not</u> punish with violence (physical or verbal).

Even though there is no evidence that rough and tumble play actually fosters aggressive behavior, such play is discouraged by many teachers and preschool supervisors. However, there is evidence that engaging in rough and tumble play is part of the normal developmental process. It also appears to provide, as incidental benefits, exercise contributing to physical development and social bonding. Although the latter can be developed in other ways, it seems

important to respect the individual ways in which a child makes meaning of her/his world, and helping him/her translate the feelings expressed in their bodies (whether happy or angry, etc.) into words! Children need help in the kinds of social techniques that, in the end, make it possible for them to achieve their goals.

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